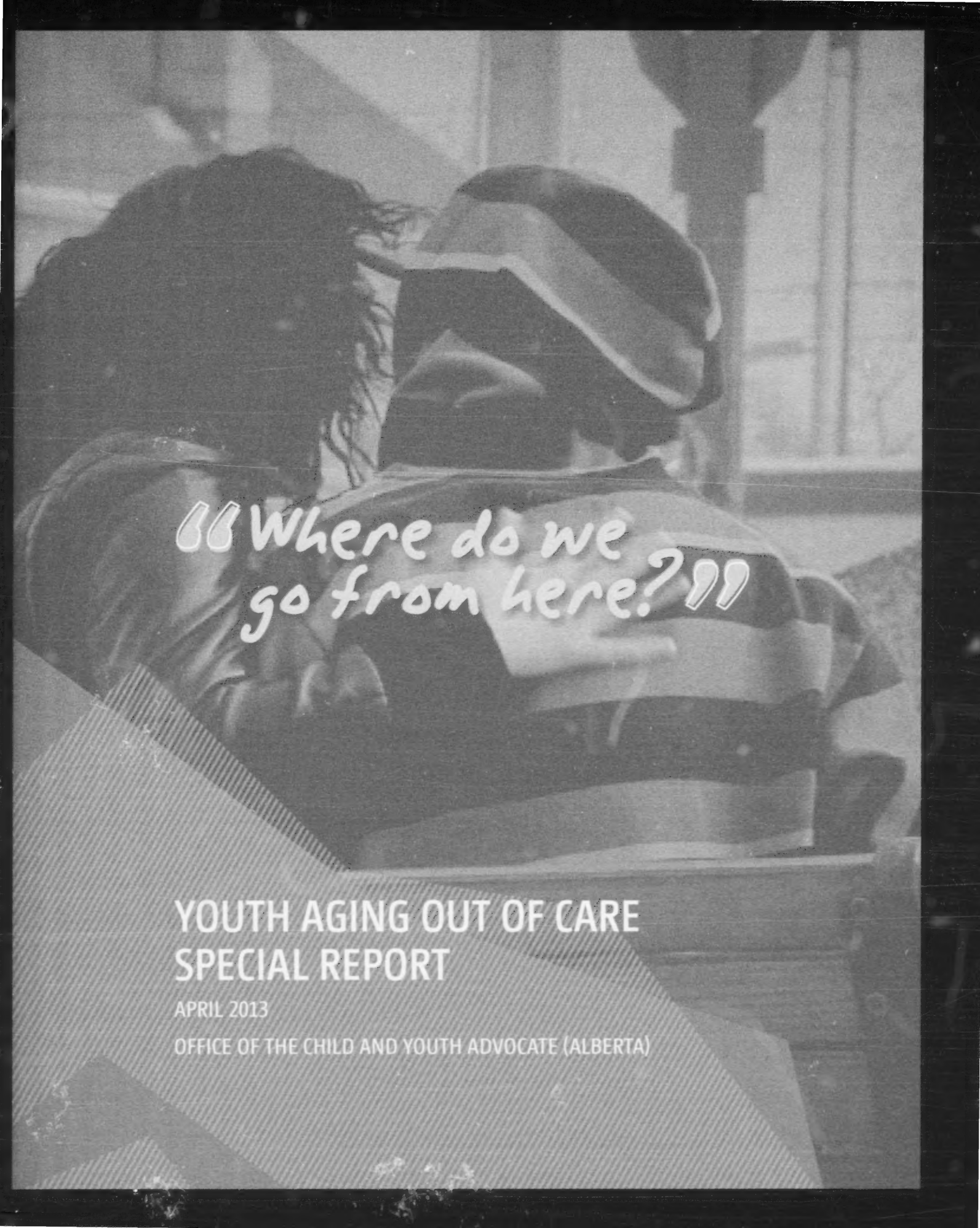

YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE SPECIAL REPORT

APRIL 2013

OFFICE OF THE CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCATE (ALBERTA)

9908–106 Ave

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the issue of young people transitioning out of care into adulthood. This is not new territory for the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA). As far back as 1997, concerns about young people leaving care and transitioning to adulthood have been raised. Since then, the OCYA has identified this issue in eight of its annual reports.

To date, neither the repeated efforts of the OCYA to elevate the issue, nor the responses from Government to address the issues surrounding young people leaving care have been effective.

In 2011-12, regional workshops for professionals called "Advocacy 101: The Basics and Beyond" were hosted by the OCYA. Each workshop concluded with a youth panel. These young people were invited to speak because they had an advocate in their lives and were willing to speak about their experiences with advocacy. Throughout their stories a common theme emerged; youth transitioning out of care are still facing significant challenges. This, along with a number of discussions with OCYA staff, young people and other stakeholders led to the formation of this report.

Contained in this report are some difficult issues that young people raised with us that they want to have addressed. Also in this report, young people described examples of what they viewed as effective and promising practice. Although not exhaustive, we do believe the information provided by those who spoke with us, the research that we reviewed, and the recommendations within this report provide a more solid foundation for young people to effectively transition from being in Government care to being independent young adults in our Province.

When the Ministry of Human Services was formed, there were many who said a broadly based human service Ministry could provide a more comprehensive approach to the people it serves. This report provides opportunities to do just that – create and support a comprehensive program to help these vulnerable young people succeed.

The challenge is to develop and sustain the will to take the action needed to produce effective results for young people leaving Government care. While these young people may have connections to families and communities, they are after all, Alberta's children. They ought to be able to expect our very best effort to help them succeed. The challenge is whether or not we in Alberta have the will to do all we can to ensure these vulnerable young people become independent, successful adults.

Del Graff
Child and Youth Advocate

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NOTE ON WORDING

Within this document we use the words "in care" to describe youth receiving services, even though not all of them were technically "in care." This term is what the youth chose to use when referring to themselves. Some had moved from being in care to receiving other supports such as Support and Financial Assistance Agreements (agreements that young people, once they turn 18, can sign with the Ministry that outlines the duration and types of support and financial services that will be provided to them), so they still consider themselves to be "in care."

Throughout the document, the word "Region" includes Child and Family Service Authorities (CFSAs) and Delegated First Nation Agencies (DFNAs). The Ministry of Human Services is responsible for policy and practice with regard to directly supporting youth in care.

Quotes from youth transitioning out of care:

"You go from a place of someone always taking care of you to fending for yourself at 18."

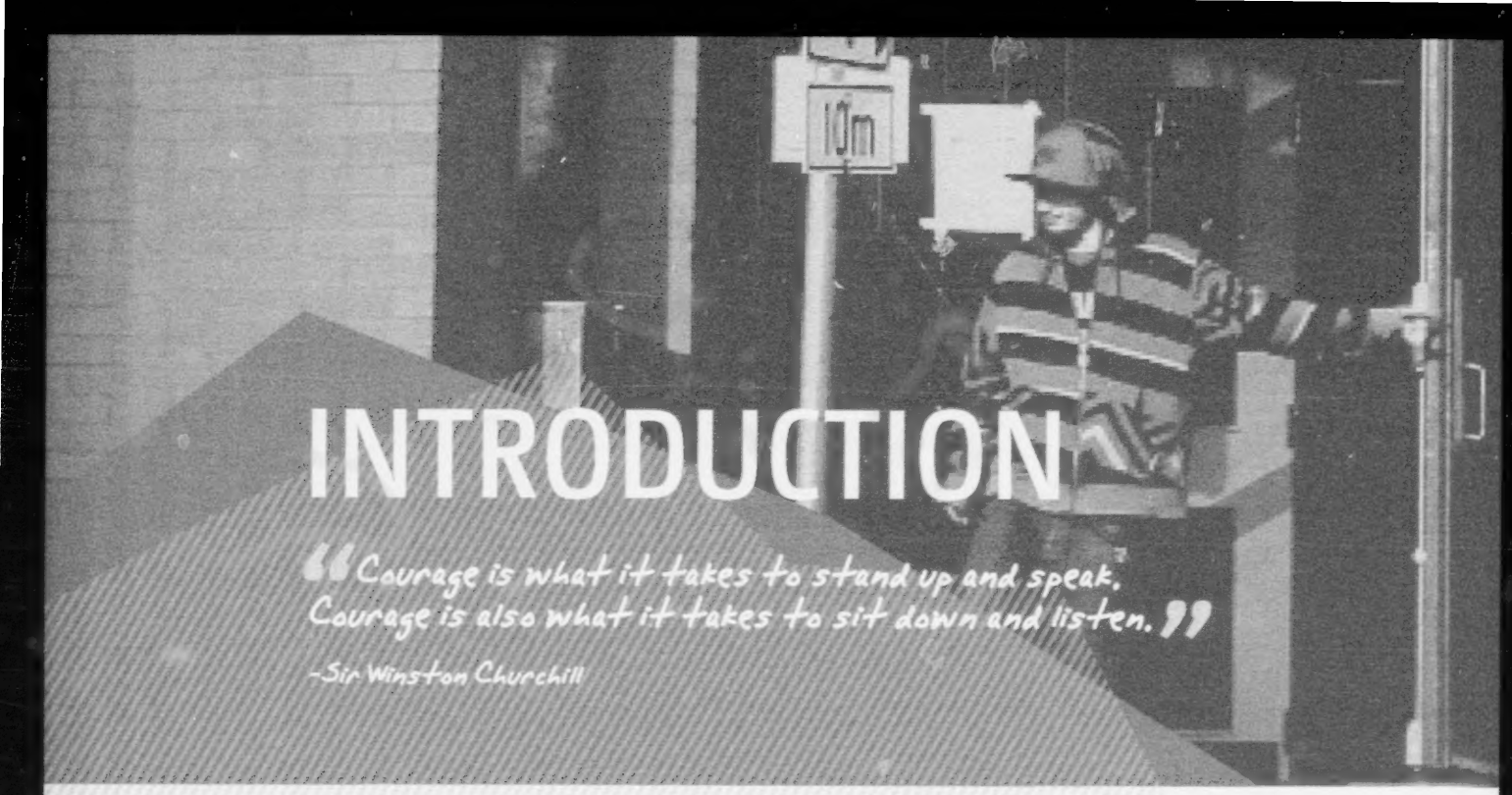
LIMITATIONS

The data gathering for this report was a combination of research, advocacy experience, online surveys and face-to-face interviews with youth and the professionals who support them. As this was an open dialogue rather than a formal research project, we recognize there are limitations to what we heard.

We sought to reach out broadly. However, because many of the youth who came to focus groups learned of the project through community agencies, we heard less from individuals who had grown up in foster families with adequate supports and positive experiences. Most responses came from youth connected to agencies.

We also realize that the topics discussed in the document do not reflect all of the issues facing youth transitioning out of care – but these issues were the ones raised most frequently.

"The biggest struggle? Facing the world by yourself."



INTRODUCTION

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

-Sir Winston Churchill

IN THE FALL OF 2012,

the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) hosted focus groups with both youth and professionals to discuss the topic of youth aging or transitioning out of care. We heard from over 140 young people who had been in care, were currently in care, or were leaving Government care. We also heard from approximately 75 professionals who had many years of experience working with these young people. In addition, we reviewed what the literature had to say about this population of young people.

Youth shared their personal thoughts and feelings because it was critical to their futures. These young people generously shared their views and suggested ways to improve outcomes for other young people transitioning out of care. A combination of research, youth focus groups, surveys, and feedback from those who work closely with these young people provided the OCYA with a foundation to make recommendations.

Research on youth leaving care shows that youth often feel unprepared for adulthood as "transitioning" to adulthood does not just happen. It needs to be planned, supported and developed over time.

Youth in care don't just need the same supports as their peers; they need more. They have experienced some very difficult circumstances in their lives and may need extra help as they move to independence.

"Turning 18 doesn't magically make me independent."

The issue has been raised many times over the years and the fact that youth keep raising it indicates the need for change. There are still many young people leaving the care of the Ministry without the proper skills or supports to be successful in adulthood.

This report summarizes the feedback collected from the workshops and focus groups. Three major themes were identified; the need for better **access** to programs and supports, **connections** to supportive adults, and increased **resources**. Finally, the report makes recommendations that need to be implemented if young people are to feel supported and be successful transitioning out of government care.

BACKGROUND

Since the inception of the Children's Advocate Office in 1989, young people transitioning out of care have been asking for the help of advocates to have their needs met under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* (formerly the *Child Welfare Act)*. In fact, over half of the Annual Reports written by the Provincial Advocate since 1997-98 have addressed this issue, or identified related concerns.

The Children's Advocate 1998-99 Annual Report stated, "The need to provide young people with opportunities to succeed as emerging adults remains a challenge to the Child Welfare system. While society has embraced families to support their offspring well into the child's twenties and beyond, youth dependent on the guardianship of the province have had to accept something far less." (p. 17)

The 1999-2000 Annual Report further asserted, "The premature withdrawal of support services can be absolutely devastating to young people struggling with the transition to adulthood. Child welfare authorities need to be aware that this is happening and to take steps to ensure that a more humane approach is put in place." (p. 26)

The 2000-01 Annual Report stated, "These same inappropriate actions by natural parents [terminating services for youth age 15 and up] would result in a child welfare investigation and yet they are commonplace in the child welfare system. How can that be?" (p. 11) The 2005-06 Annual Report recommended that transitional services not be terminated for "non-compliance."

While the legislation allows for the provision of services to youth until age 22, many youth state they are not given adequate time to transition to independence, while others state they are not given the opportunity to sign a Support and Financial Assistance Agreement. As a result, youth are not being "transitioned" into the adult world with adequate supports or proper planning.

Over the past five years young people have brought this issue forward to the OCYA over 350 times, an average of 70 times per year. Although it is only one of many advocacy issues the office deals with, it has a major impact on the lives of these young people. About two thirds of young people who turn 18 while in care, enter into a Support and Financial Assistance Agreement. However, most agreements are short term in nature.

The following graph highlights the duration of Support and Financial Assistance Agreements (SFAAs). More than 56 percent (217) of these Agreements lasted less than one year, and less than 18 percent (68) of these Agreements lasted more than two years.

DURATION OF SUPPORT & FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AGREEMENTS (SFAAS) (FOR YOUNG ADULTS CONCLUDING SFAAS IN 2011/2012)

The 2012 report published by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth for Ontario states that young people feel that being in care "ends" with youth feeling like they "got the boot."

"There should be more focus on transitioning youth who are ready to be independent, and not basing the decision on age."

WHAT WE HEARD

"Being in care, you have a limited amount of time to figure out what you want to do. When you have parents, you can try things out...and come home if it doesn't work out."

THIS SECTION SUMMARIZES

the feedback from the 15 OCYA hosted focus groups held with youth during the fall of 2012 in partnership with community agencies. These agencies were located across the province and worked with young people receiving services under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*. Those unable to attend a focus group were able to provide their feedback through a phone interview or online survey.

Young people provided answers to the following questions:

1. How do you feel about your eventual transition out of care?
2. Where do you see yourself 2-3 years from now?
3. What will you need to help you be successful once you are no longer in care?
4. Whom do you see as important to assisting you in reaching your goal?
5. What has helped you manage things so far?
6. Do you have any recommendations for change?

Based on the discussions that arose from this set of questions, three themes emerged:

- Youth need additional **ACCESS** to programs and supports
- Youth need genuine **CONNECTIONS** to supportive adults in the community
- Youth need increased **RESOURCES** to help them become independent.

ACCESS TO PROGRAMS AND SUPPORTS

One of the more prominent themes emerging from the youths' stories was the need for access to ongoing mental health services and supports. **They identified feelings of anger, loneliness, depression and difficulties in creating healthy boundaries in their relationships.**

The detrimental effects of changing residences and never knowing where to call home, or for how long, can be emotionally damaging to youth (Smithgall, et al, 2005; Reid, et al, 2007). Loss of significant relationships, disruptions in education and loss of family contacts can often reduce one's sense of belonging. Youth in care often live with a fear of rejection, particularly in relation to their caregivers, which can result in their misbehavior and problems in their placements (Lambe et al. 2009).

Some youth requested psychiatric assessments, and were denied. Youth who had been diagnosed with a mental illness and were receiving services had concerns that they would lose access to psychologists, counselors and other mental health supports or would be unable to pay for their medications once out of care.

Many youth indicated that there were issues with accessing supports, even if the young person was eligible or entitled to them under policy and legislation. Some youth had requested things such as mental health assessments, recreation funds, and visits with family, but the youth said the requests were sometimes dismissed or ignored. Others spoke of trying to have their files re-opened, but encountered obstacles. If policy stated they were eligible for something, the young people wanted to know they wouldn't have to fight for it.

Other youth talked about the traumatic experience that occurred because they were taken from their home and placed into care. Some had been apprehended from homes that were abusive, but felt they had also experienced trauma while in care. Either way, they felt the Ministry had never acknowledged that by being in care that they would need additional mental health supports. Many asked, **"Why can't they (the Ministry) provide me with counseling until I don't think I need it anymore? My issues won't stop when I turn 18."**

Research shows that youth who have been in or are in care are up to four times more likely to be affected by mental health issues throughout their lives (Joint Special Report: Ministry of Health, B.C., 2006). Some youth may have an increased risk for mental illness due to family

cont...

history, experiences prior to coming into care, being in care, a history of disruptions, or they have been placed in care due to a psychiatric disorder (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). A high percentage of youth in care report having depression and/or other serious mental health conditions that include eating disorders, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Youth who have been involved with child protection services are up to eight times more likely to be affected by post-traumatic stress disorder as compared to their peers (DePanfilis & Daining, 2007). A smooth transition from the children's mental health to the adult's mental health system is required to ensure that resources and services are accessible and ongoing (Harrison, et al, 2007).

Some young people in the focus groups mentioned how having access to a peer support group for youth in care would benefit them as they transitioned into adulthood.

"I worry I won't be able to make it on my own."

CONNECTIONS TO SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

In almost every focus group, a prevailing sense of shared loneliness was identified. Many of these young people felt that coming into care had forced them into a world where they did not feel connected to the adults who cared for them. Many young people felt that the lack of a permanent home and relationships made them different from others in their classrooms, neighborhoods and on their sports teams. They reported that being part of a system made them feel like a number rather than a person. As they moved towards independence, many believed it would be a furthering of their loneliness – asking, "When I need help, who will I call?"

A key concern was the youth's desire to be connected to people who would support them when they were no longer in care. They wanted to be involved with people who knew them, cared about them and would be able to develop meaningful and lasting relationships with them. Young people who described having positive, consistent and genuine relationships with caseworkers and foster parents felt more supported and were better able to establish healthy relationships.

Other young people talked about some caseworkers who did not communicate regularly with them, were hard to reach and seemed restricted by bureaucratic rules. Some youth felt caregivers and caseworkers did not really care about them, and they were only supporting the youth because they were being "paid."

Youth described their desire for connections to trusted and caring adults who they could go to for advice and support as they transitioned to adulthood. If parents or other adult relatives were not able to keep that connection, youth stated they needed someone who could. The desire for

community mentors came up quite frequently at the focus groups. Youth who currently had a mentor described the person as being extremely helpful in their lives. These youth stated they felt much more optimistic.

The youths' vulnerability does not appear to diminish after they leave care. Young adults become more vulnerable due to housing instability and poverty. Added to this is a lack of a strong social network and in particular the presence of a stable, caring adult (NGA Centre for Best Practice, 2007).

Young people said they felt much better about the transition into independence when they were connected to professionals beyond their caseworker (agency workers, foster parents): as they found these individuals to be "supportive, caring and understanding." As an example, support from a community agency was seen by youth as being a better match to their needs, since they were able to access ongoing support to check in, ask for advice, or celebrate successes even after the youth's program had ended. They also liked that agencies provided programs and supports on evenings and weekends, made decisions based on their personal knowledge of them and had the freedom to "think outside the box" when it came to meeting their needs. **When young people developed a strong connection to community agency staff, the young people believed they had someone to go to if they needed help in the future; the community agency became the youth's surrogate family.**

For youth leaving care, one of the concerns often cited is that they are not ready to live independently. Opportunities for skill development and practice as well as the skill of self-determination are lacking while in care (Fuchs, et al, 2010; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Acquiring skills to live independently must be an ongoing process prior to the youth's departure from care. Independent living programs that allow youth a longer period to develop life skills have proven to be successful. Rates of high school graduation, employment and self-sufficiency were higher for youth in care when they were receiving services to prepare them for independence (Scannapiecon, Schagrin, & Scannapiecon, 1995). Life skills include cooking, grocery shopping, budgeting, job searching, career planning, finding a home, knowing how to access community services, parenting skills, interpersonal relationship skills, self-care, general communication skills, work and study skills, social skills and daily tasks (Casey Life Skills Assessment, 2003).

"When I want to start a family, who will teach me how (to be a parent) and help me?"

Many youth also expressed their desire to reconnect with their biological family once they were no longer in care. At the same time, many felt uncertain about having the skills to create new, healthy relationships and appropriate boundaries with family members. Sometimes young people viewed their biological family, whom they had been removed from when they came into care, as their only source of support after leaving care. Others sought meaningful and positive connections and relationships with people who they hope would become their new "family."

Often when youth talked about connecting with family, they focused on siblings. Many had been separated from their siblings when they came into care, which was a source of great frustration and grief. The majority of the youth expressed a desire to either maintain or regain both their sibling and family relationships.

A small number of the youth who participated in focus group discussions were pregnant or young parents. These youth felt nervous about their own abilities to parent successfully, because they had not been exposed to stable or healthy parenting role models. They wanted to be good parents and good role models for their children. Some stated that they did not understand why they had been apprehended, and expressed concern regarding how being in care would influence their parenting.

These youth want to have relationships with people and organizations that will guide them with their parenting. They do not want history to be repeated; they want to be good parents.

"I am pregnant right now, and I want to do well for my kid...be a good parent. I want to prove I can be independent and responsible."

INCREASED RESOURCES

Many youth expressed a need for greater resources (an increased variety of programs, more funding, skill-building opportunities, etc.) as they transitioned into adulthood.

The majority of young people who shared their experiences felt there was an expectation placed upon them that at age 18 they would be self-sufficient. However, when they reached that age, they did not feel prepared. A significant number of these youth indicated they should have been given more of an opportunity to develop:

- connections to resources allowing them to develop a strong sense of self and enabling them to explore career paths and opportunities
- employment skills, for example, by having a job before the age of 18
- a good educational experience that had or would soon lead to high school graduation
- an understanding of healthy relationships
- life skills training or hands-on learning focused on such things as money management, household chores, cooking and nutrition, the law and citizens' rights, landlord and tenant rights, sexual health (including pregnancy and parenting), post-secondary education and how to access adult community resources.

Many young people felt the Ministry did not prepare them for independence, yet remained determined to succeed in spite of this. Many believed that due to their limited funding, they would most likely have to live in unsafe neighborhoods, if they found housing at all. **The reality is that many landlords would not rent to them.** Youth also said they lacked adequate start-up funds to pay for damage deposits, buy furniture and stock kitchens with food. Although provision of these resources are outlined in policy, some youth identified they were unable to access them.

Rates of transience and homelessness for youth leaving care are still high. A three-year longitudinal study completed by the University of Victoria (2007) found that thirty (30) percent of participants had moved four or more times in the (eighteen months) after leaving care, and forty-five (45) percent of the participants experienced homelessness. Homeless people are up to seven times more likely to indicate they were in care during their childhood than the general population (Koegel, Melamidt and Burnam, 1995).

Some young people indicated the constant fear of having their funding cut off set them up to fail. Many felt that transition planning wasn't flexible or reflective of their needs and wants. If they asked for more resources, some youth said they were made to feel as though they were manipulating the system, even if they were eligible to receive the services they requested.

Another frequently heard comment was that these young people felt they were punished for being "too good" or "too bad." If they were doing well, for example, attending school and not disrupting their placement, they were seen as not being in need of supports and services. These young people were often perceived as being ready to transition because they were stable, but that perception did not reflect how ill-prepared they felt. If young people were not meeting the expectations laid out in the Transition Plans they were often "cut off" from supports without adequate notice.

> *"For children in the care of child welfare, the transition to adulthood is often abrupt with a sudden loss of adult support. These young people, who already face multiple barriers, are expected to achieve at the age of 18 what most other young people of that age do not - working towards independence" (Youth in Transition Working Committee, 2001).*

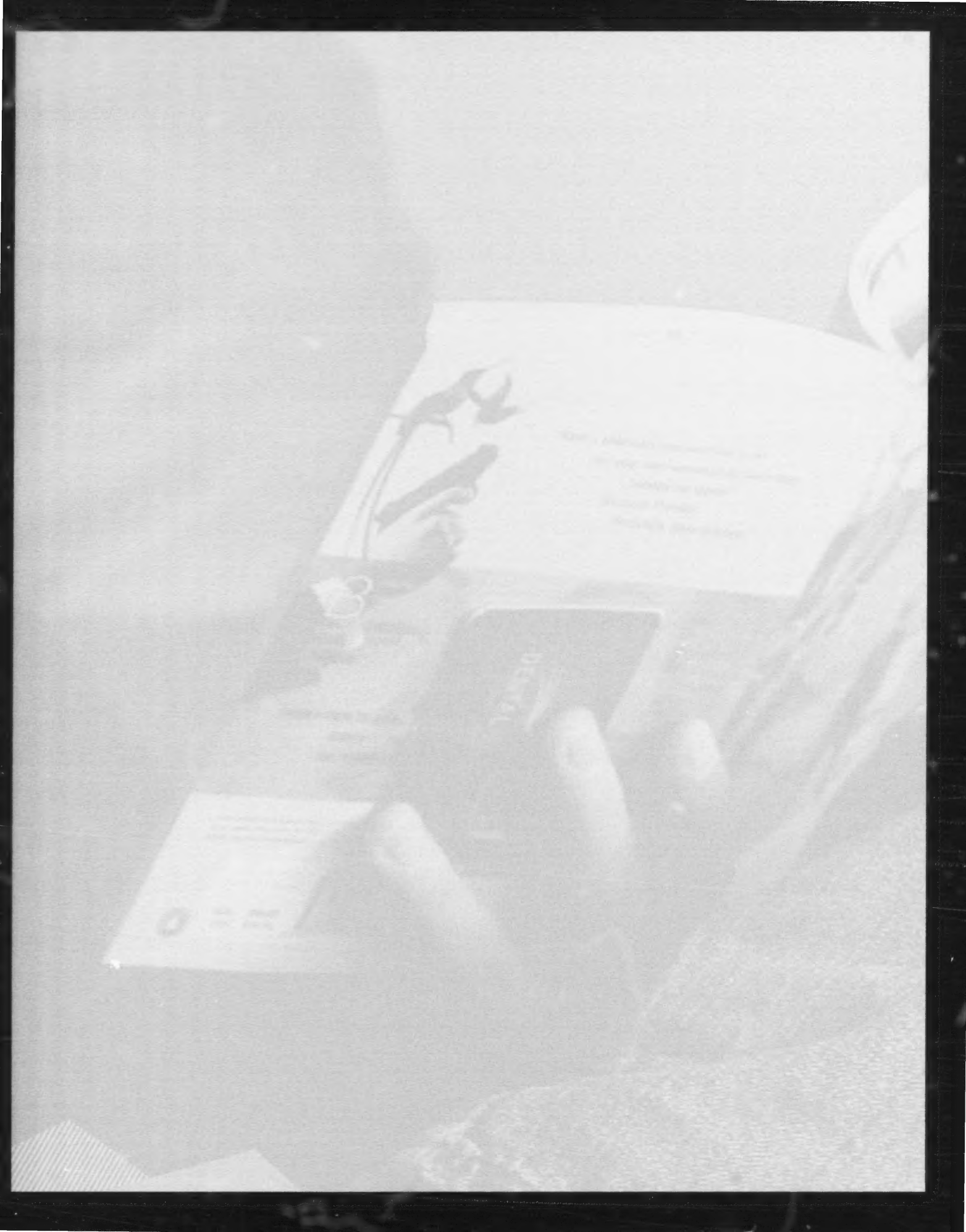
Young people also said that some caseworkers seemed more youth-friendly and flexible than others did. Some young people identified that they had input into their Transition Plans, access to all resources available to them (i.e. vacation funds, recreation funds, Support and Financial Assistance Agreements, etc.), and information about how they would transition out of care that included providing connections and community support resources. Some youth described other caseworkers as being less open, withholding or being unaware of information and the supports they are eligible to receive.

"We are torn between doing too well or too badly - you have to justify why you need assistance."

When discussing Transition to Independence Plans (Transition Plans), which begin at age 16 and are in place to support young people to prepare for adulthood, there were a variety of responses. Some youth agreed they were helpful. Several young people talked about the unrealistic expectations placed upon them within Transition Plans. They believed they were expected to find safe and stable housing and employment or educational opportunities within unrealistic periods so their caseworker could "check it off the list." **Other youth had no idea what a Transition to Independence Plan was or even the role their caseworker has in preparing them for independence.**

Prior to leaving care, youth need to be given the opportunity to participate in making decisions that assist them in gaining skills for independent living and organizing their lives (Aldridge, 1996). Success in obtaining education, higher paying employment, appropriate supports and safe housing options are some of the additional components required for a successful transition into stable housing (Serge, et al, 2002; Aldridge, 1996).

To successfully transition from being in care to independence, young people want and need: meaningful involvement in decisions being made about them, better access to programs, strong connections to supportive adults and additional resources.



PROFESSIONALS COMMENTS

"We have unrealistic expectations of youth – we set them up for failure when systems don't work well together."

THIS SECTION SUMMARIZES

comments that the OCYA heard from the more than 75 professionals who work with or support youth between the ages of 17 and 21 years and who still receive services and supports under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*. The professionals provided feedback through one of four focus groups or an online survey.

They provided feedback on the following questions:

1. From your perspective, what is currently happening for youth leaving care?
2. What are some successes that you have seen and what factors contributed to these successes?
3. As someone who works with these youth, what are your greatest struggles or challenges?
4. What needs to change in order to achieve better outcomes for youth leaving care?

Most of the respondents were passionate about the young people they serve. They wanted the best possible outcomes for the young people they worked with, **yet felt frustrated with the processes and systems restricting them from providing the best possible support.**

To achieve positive outcomes, youth require stability in placements, regular contact with social workers, appropriate supports and resources for the primary caregiver, and a clear understanding of their individual needs (Reid, 2007; Lambe & McLennan, 2009; Fuchs, et al, 2010).

When asked about the current reality for youth transitioning or aging out of care, professionals provided answers that often echoed the views of the young people. Professionals were able to appreciate the issues and challenges on a broader level. **They were also very clear that although many of the recommendations (from professionals and/or youth) might already be laid out in policy, there was inconsistent application across the province.**

As is the case in the youth's comments earlier in the report, the comments from professionals fell under the same categories. They are:

- **ACCESS** to programs and supports
- **CONNECTIONS** to supportive adults
- Increased **RESOURCES**

ACCESS TO PROGRAMS AND SUPPORTS

Professionals often talked about youth in care not being able to access the programs and supports they were entitled to receive. They indicated that sometimes it was due to caseworkers not providing the needed support or not being able to due to complicated processes and excessive paperwork. An example often cited was how accessing or applying for Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD), and other similar adult programs is very difficult. **They wondered why the programs could not work more effectively together to ensure a smooth transition for eligible youth, especially now that these programs were housed in the same Ministry.**

Professionals also described how youth might be given access to different supports and resources, based on which office was responsible for their file. They stated that applying policy consistently across offices is needed within communities to ensure fairness (examples given were that one office gave food vouchers while another provided a referral to the food bank; or how some offices were flexible and creative when working with youth while others were not).

Professionals said that for youth struggling with addictions, gaining access to appropriate treatment programs and housing was a constant challenge. They described how easily youth could be kicked out of a placement for drug-related issues yet were not supported to get help.

A common comment heard from professionals was that youth transitioning out of care have many challenges, **so when they are entitled to or eligible for any supports, the supports should be easily accessible.**

"There is always confusion, and if workers can't keep up with the changes to systems, policy and programs, how can youth?"

CONNECTIONS TO SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

Relationship-based practice was often discussed in the professionals' focus groups and surveys. They identified why youth in care need long-term positive relationships to be successful and resilient. They stated that developing strong supportive relationships during and after being in care is good for a youth's emotional and social development.

It was suggested that having smaller caseloads would assist Ministry staff in building relationships with youth. Ministry staff often expressed a desire to spend more one-on-one time with the youth on their caseloads, but stated that paperwork demands and the need to respond to crises made it difficult.

Staff from community agencies echoed the importance of fostering long-term relationships with youth transitioning out of care. They described how they often felt helpless when decisions were made concerning a youth that they felt were not reflective of the young person's needs and wants, yet they were unable to influence the decision. They felt they were responsible to either meet, or assist youth in meeting all of their transitioning needs, yet were not given adequate resources to provide the required supports.

INCREASED RESOURCES

Of all the resources discussed, housing and appropriate placements was the most common. Both Ministry and agency staff identified that transitioning youth successfully out of care was affected by the availability and affordability of safe housing. There were strong concerns that young people had few options allowing them to live safely in the communities of their choosing. They also indicated that there were not enough placement options that were appropriate for the variation in diagnoses (some youth have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), struggle with addictions, mental health, or other concerns). **The lack of appropriate housing was identified as the most common challenge for youth receiving services, making them vulnerable to victimization.**

> "Youth workers with a long-term relationship with a youth should be able to give input into placement and long term plans."

Community organizations and group care agencies spoke often about the lack of availability and the difficulty accessing resources both for them and for youth transitioning out of care. They stated that to provide better services to young people, they would need increased resources and autonomy in decision-making. These professionals felt similar to the youth with Transition Plans who had to "succeed or lose funding." **Agency staff would prefer that program funding be based on positive outcomes such as "forming positive relationships with youth" rather than whether youth graduate from a program.** They found that focusing on long-term relationships rather than short-term goals produced better outcomes and a more successful transition to adulthood for young people.

In a review of the literature that examines how the relationship between service recipients and professionals is understood; Trevithick (2003) identifies, and stresses, the importance of the quality of relationship developed in all areas of the helping professions. She states that a good working relationship is necessary and plays a far more important role than the intervention utilized. In fact, it is primarily the strength of the relationship, coupled with the worker's skill set that will assist the service user in moving forward. This is not to indicate that programs and services are not useful, or significantly less important, but the greater the quality of relationship, the increased likelihood the service user will be successful with the program or service.

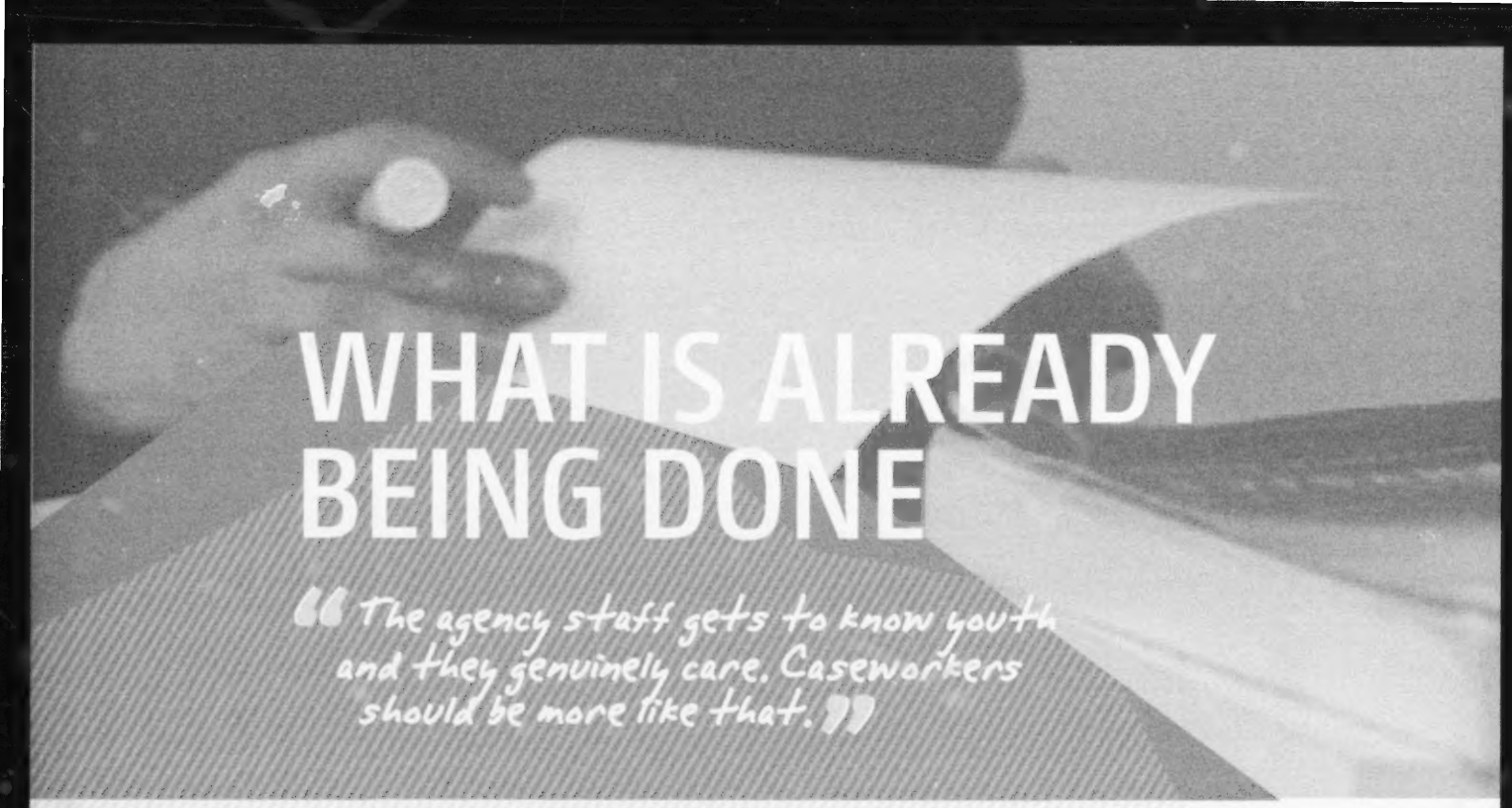
The professionals also noted that cutting off a young person's funding (closing a young person's file) too early had the potential to set the young person up for failure. They stated that **young people transitioning out of care needed to be allowed to make mistakes as they navigated their way to independence and not be punished by the removal of or reduction in their support services.**

Brain research informs us that the areas of the brain governing reason and impulse control do not fully develop until about age 25, so many young people rely on the emotional area of the brain to make decisions. This coupled with other chemical and physical changes helps explain the challenges many young adults have in controlling impulses, negotiating social relationships and planning for their future. This also explains why young people, particularly those in care who have experienced trauma, often struggle and require additional supports in their transition to adulthood (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley and Burton, 2009).

For example, when a youth turns 18, foster parents are no longer eligible to receive regular foster rates for the young person's care. Regardless of where they are placed, once they are 18, their funding normally changes to room and board rates. If they continue to live with their foster parents this is considered to be a supported living arrangement to encourage their independence – they are viewed as not requiring the care and maintenance that a youth under 18 requires. Room and board rates are usually significantly less than regular foster care funding, which sometimes results in the young person having to leave the foster home.

The comments from professionals echoed the themes we heard from young people - the need for young people to have better access to programs, strengthened connections to supportive adults, the need for additional resources and the need for services to be delivered in a more flexible manner. The commonality in what we repeatedly heard from young people, supported by the same messages from professionals, reinforces the need to take what was heard seriously.

"Housing is a huge issue. There is a chronic shortage of safe housing, and many youth face discrimination if they try to rent somewhere."



WHAT IS ALREADY BEING DONE

"The agency staff gets to know youth and they genuinely care. Caseworkers should be more like that."

AS A POSITIVE RESOURCE FOR YOUTH IN CARE,

many of the young people involved in the focus groups and surveys named the Advancing Futures bursary as being integral to their present or future success. The bursary provides youth who have been in care, and meet the criteria, access to funding for upgrading and post-secondary education. The funds will help pay for tuition, books and supplies, a living allowance and childcare costs if needed. Whether youth were currently accessing the bursary or planning to access it in the future they recognized the value of the program.

However, not all youth are aware of the bursary program even though the June 2012 Enhancement Act Policy Manual, (Section 4.2.4) states this information is to be shared with them when a Transition to Independence Plan is developed. Some young people stated that the amount available in both the living allowance and coordinator support should be increased. Yet they said, overall, the Advancing Futures bursary is a good option for young people transitioning out of care to both further their education and secure their future.

Furthermore, programs providing independent living placements combined with life skills training were highlighted as being extremely helpful to youth. Some youth we heard from, with connections to community agencies, said they felt more prepared for independence and viewed these agencies as one of their main supports. Youth were of the opinion that most agency workers were genuine, youth-friendly and engaging.

Through agencies young people are given multiple opportunities to learn life skills. They are often connected to a youth worker who works with them to build a network of supports. **When young people are connected to a youth-serving organization in their community, their fears about transitioning are reduced.** They feel they still have someone to go to if they are ever in crisis, even if they are no longer involved in that particular agency's programs.

Emotional trauma often manifests as anti-social, hostile and aggressive behaviours, which the caregiver may not be equipped to handle. These can lead to placement breakdown. Behaviours displayed by the youth become the focus as opposed to the cause of the behaviour, which is unhealed trauma (Anglin, 2003; Reid, 2007).

Agency programs provide opportunities for youth to learn life skills and a safe home living environment. Youth expressed that programs like these help them transition more effectively. However, for some youth, access is prevented due to long waiting lists, lack of awareness of the programs, or finding out about them too late. **Other youth are not eligible for certain programs due to factors such as FASD, addictions, behavioral challenges or mental illness and have fewer program options.**

A study conducted by the National Youth in Care Network (2006) found that out of 59 young people who had been in care, 70 per cent had been prescribed medications designed to alter behaviour during their time in care. The youth reported feeling as if this was the relied-upon method of "fixing" their behaviours. The use of medication led the youth to believe that in order to deal with challenges throughout their life the use of chemicals was an appropriate option. Several youth stated that this had led to a dependence on prescribed medication, illegal drugs and/or alcohol (Fuchs, et al, 2010).

Most youth using psychotropics are not in any form of counseling so they may relate these drugs as solutions to their problems. Therefore, to use a non-prescribed substance is just another medication to them. They view street drugs as a more casual means of dealing with their problems (Lambe, et al, 2009).

Some youth shared their desire to be involved in a peer support group where they could talk openly about their past experiences and provide each other with emotional support. Some Ministry-led programs provide peer support and connect youth to positive adult mentors in their communities.

An example of a positive community-based program is a youth in care mentoring program in Edmonton that seems to offer many of the things youth in our focus groups requested: connection to a community agency, positive adult mentors, peer support, life skills programming and links to community resources. Their weekly program provides peer support and group mentoring, works on weekly individual goal setting, connects young people to community resources and matches young people to mentors out in the community to provide additional one-to-one support. Mentorship program staff identified that of the **young people who age out of their program, many offer to come back and mentor the new program members.**

Apart from the ongoing positive programs discussed by youth, there are several initiatives in development. Developing these initiatives may support the recommendations identified in this report, and help improve outcomes for youth transitioning out of care.

In southern Alberta a program has been built through local partnerships. This includes provincial and municipal government, local police service, the school district, the mental health services, and an Aboriginal council. As a central contact, the coordinator provides wraparound support services (housing, employment, education, mental health counseling, advocacy and mentorship) to homeless young people ages 16-24 before they become entrenched in street life. Although this is not a program specifically offered to youth from care, it could be of benefit to youth in care transitioning to independence who are struggling with housing issues and developing community connections – both of which were identified as being issues for this group. **Youth transitioning out of care would benefit from an approach that uses a wraparound model to assist them in accessing services, supports and resources.**

VanDenBerg (1996) identifies that best practices in delivering services to children and young people in care are comprehensive, coordinated, community based services and focus on supporting their physical, mental and emotional health - known as "wrap around" service provision. "Wrap around" services are currently being used both nationally and internationally to focus on individual needs and promote positive outcomes for young people in care. The New South Wales Department of Community Services (2007) identified that transitional periods, particularly the transition to adulthood, are the key points in which young people require this type of support. Using a thorough assessment, needs are identified and proper supports are incorporated into case planning to ensure the young person's success.

Legislation allows Support and Financial Assistance Agreements to be initiated with all eligible youth in care when they turn 18. One region has however implemented a policy that the agreement is automatically put in place and terminated only if the youth agrees with this decision. If the youth is eligible, a nine-month agreement is signed. It can be renewed until their 22 birthday and is only terminated if the youth requests it. The impetus for the directive was the recognition by the region of their guardianship responsibility and the need to provide a safety net and support youth in their transition to adulthood.

CONCLUSION

ALL YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO BE PROVIDED WITH OPPORTUNITIES

to learn, grow, and make mistakes on their way to independence. During this time they require consistent encouragement, assistance and commitment from those around them. This is magnified for young people in care – the need for these opportunities and support were themes throughout their stories.

Their stories had consistent elements that are reflective of all young people in care, the need for a solid foundation of supportive relationships with adults, stable financial support and safe housing options, flexible service delivery and resources to assist young people to make healthy transitions.

The Ministry of Human Services, with its wide range of programs and services, can be more comprehensive and effective in the ways it serves young people transitioning out of care. These young people have described a range of support and help they need to succeed in their transitions to adulthood. The information provided by these youth and our recommendations, need to result in a renewed effort by the Ministry of Human Services to meet its obligations to these young people so they experience the very best support possible as they move forward to adulthood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS

present an opportunity for Human Services to deliver a more targeted and effective service to young people who are leaving Government care; service that will support their transition to adulthood. To meet the needs of Alberta's youth transitioning out of our care the Child and Youth Advocate recommends that the Ministry of Human Services:

1. Ensures young people leaving care have affordable, safe, and stable housing options and the financial resources to support themselves independently.
   - Revise policy and practice to provide the support required by young people.
2. Dedicates and trains caseworkers to meet the unique needs of young people leaving care.
   - Identify caseworkers to serve this population, including dedicated time available for young people to access them.
   - Provide training to staff on the needs of this population and how to engage them.
3. Increases the awareness of caseworkers, caregivers, and service providers about resources for young people leaving care and support young people to access them.
   - Create greater awareness among caseworkers, caregivers, and agency staff about resources and programs that support transitioning to independence.
   - Build processes for a seamless transition from 'in care' to adult services that are appropriate to their needs.

4. Ensures young people leaving care have supportive adult relationships.
    - Work with young people and caregivers so young people develop the relationships and relationship skills they require for independence.
    - Wherever possible, ensure that young people are able to effectively address their interests regarding family relationships.

5. Supports young people leaving care with access to counseling and/or mental health services and those that require it are transitioned to the adult system.
    - Provide counseling to young people who require it to address the trauma surrounding coming into care and related issues.
    - Work with Alberta Health Services to provide services that meet the mental health needs of young people.

These recommendations can all be linked back to one belief; youth leaving care want to feel as though they have value. To do this, youth need to feel respected as individuals who have their own dreams, fears, opportunities, and challenges. They need to feel secure and safe. They need to feel confident, supported and capable. Youth want the Ministry to recognize their strengths despite their struggles and to support them with the best possible opportunity to succeed.

Finally, to ensure the greatest likelihood of success, young people must be meaningfully involved in determining the services and supports they need as they transition from care.

WHAT THE ADVOCATE WILL DO

THE OFFICE OF THE CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCATE

(OCYA) will hold a symposium to bring together young people, decision makers, and community agencies to address how these recommendations can be mobilized.

Youth from or in care will be participating and engage decision makers. A series of vignettes which feature young people who have transitioned out of care or are currently receiving designated services will be shown during the symposium. The vignettes are designed to tell the story of the young people and how their lives are affected, while sparking debate and discussion.

A summary will be sent to all participants to ensure that the issues of youth aging out of care will continue to be at the forefront of government decision making.

The OCYA will continue to act on behalf of young people, both individually and collectively, while continuing to educate decision makers and the public on the importance of this issue.

WHO HELPED US GET HERE

THE CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCATE ACKNOWLEDGES

the more than 140 young people who participated in focus groups, phone interviews and online surveys. By describing the impacts of being in care, and how it will influence their future, these young people's stories reinforced the need for the Province to address these challenges.

This report could not have been written without young people's willingness to open up and share their views, stories and struggles with us.

We also want to thank the agencies and organizations that collaborated with us to host focus groups and/or assist with the recruitment of young people for the project:

- 49th Street Youth Shelter / Youth and Volunteer Centre of Red Deer
- Boys and Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters Society of Edmonton & Area – Youth in Care Mentoring Group
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary
- Catholic Social Services (Wetaskiwin Camrose Region)
- Chimo Youth Retreat Centre (Edmonton)
- Enviros Wilderness School Association – Community Programs (Calgary)
- Grande Prairie Friendship Centre

- Kasohkowew Child Wellness Society (Hobbema)
- Métis Settlements Child and Family Services
- Saddle Lake Boys and Girls Club
- Stoney Nakoda Child and Family Services
- The Alex Youth Health Centre (Calgary)
- Woods Homes (Fort McMurray)
- Youth Empowerment and Support Services (Edmonton)
- YWCA of Lethbridge

We also want to acknowledge the more than 75 professionals (agency staff, delegated caseworkers, team leads) from across the province. They took the time to provide us with information and perspective through focus groups and surveys.

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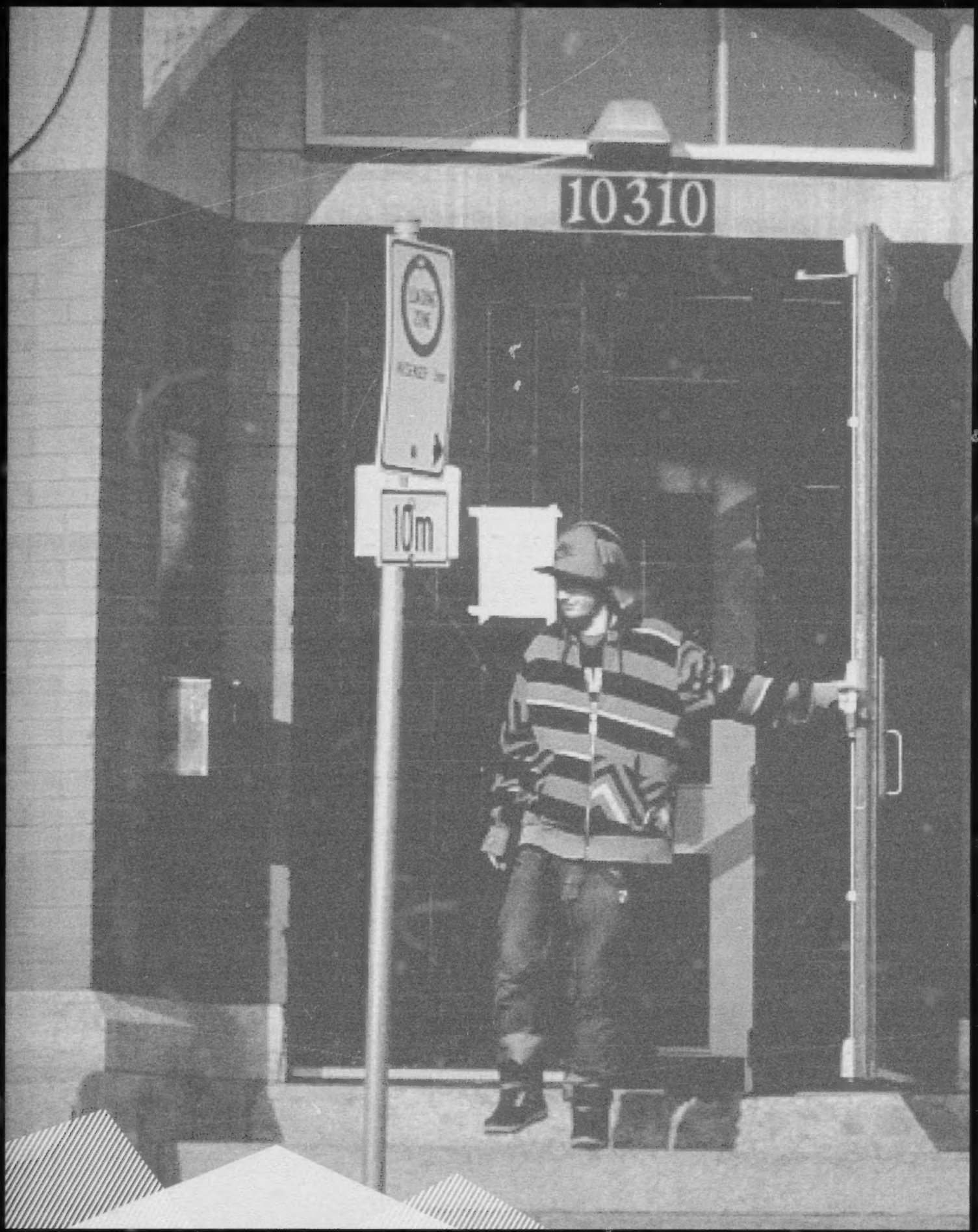
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